

It must be admitted that the more elastic and semi-random procedure of old days sometimes entailed disappointment, especially among the butterfly visitors who flitted from section to section trying to be present wherever a well-known speaker was on his feet. A rather futile proceeding it usually was, and yet there was merit in it from the missionary point of view. But the butterflies must take their chance; it is the more steady and persevering insects for whom we should aim at providing honey.

How to do it I confess I know not with any certainty; yet it must be known beforehand, in a general way, that one or two subjects will in all probability prove attractive, and it is a pity when, through lack of collaboration between the sections, a number of such attractions compete for attention on a single day.

The General Secretaries have striven this year to unite the office-bearers of the different sections, and generally to carry forward or renew the old traditions so far as possible. It may be hoped that their efforts will have a good effect in the future.

OLIVER J. LODGE.

Normanton, Lake, Salisbury, September 10.

P.S.—Since writing the above I have seen your leading article in *NATURE* of September 16. I perceive that you hold views similar in many respects to my own, and I anticipate that many readers of *NATURE* will be in agreement, now that you have given them an opportunity of reconnoitring the whole position.

O. J. L.

September 17.

ALLOW me to express my concurrence in the view presented in the leading article in *NATURE* of September 16 as to the necessity for a re-organisation—a re-adjustment to the needs of the day—of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The Association has been allowed to develop and grow in various directions without sufficient control or consideration as to how it may best serve the purpose for which it exists. It was at first a society of a missionary character, aiming at spreading in the dark regions of these islands a knowledge of and interest in science. Soon it added to this purpose that of an annual picnic and friendly gathering of workers in science. Then followed the gathering of funds by fees for membership; the application of those funds to pay, here and there, for research. Later ensued an extended and overwhelming creation of "sections," so as to give all sorts of people a meeting ground for discussion and, incidentally, for self-advertisement. The result of the last step was an embarrassing demand for meeting-rooms and committee-rooms to be provided by the town which had invited the Association to give it a visit. At the same time the subdivision of subjects led to a dilution of quality, and a free bid for popularity and newspaper notice—which has rendered the proceedings of the Association of diminishing interest and value to the educated classes, not only in the locality of its meeting, but also throughout the country. Serious workers in science are now well provided in our great cities with societies and journals by aid of which new work may be discussed. No one is particularly anxious to follow the lengthy, and frequently non-authoritative, disquisitions which the sectional meetings, as at present organised, tend to promote.

The annual meetings of the Association might be carefully arranged beforehand by the executive so as to secure the consideration and clear exposition to the public of a few definite matters of actual moment.

The "sections" of the meeting could with great advantage be reduced to four, and the addresses to be given by the president of each section, and also the "papers" accepted for consideration, limited to subjects chosen by the executive of the Association. The individuals chosen to preside or to introduce a subject should be men whose names and works are such as to command the attention and presence of the leaders of thought and social life in the district where the meeting is held.

The only wise alternative to this reconstruction seems to me to be a frank restriction of the meetings of the Association to men from all parts engaged in scientific work, glad to meet one another once a year in pretty and suitable spots (such as our old university towns and smaller cathedral cities), there to exchange in more or less intimate meeting—without the disturbing influence of newspaper reporters and notoriety hunters—recitals and exhibitions of the progress of their researches. Such are (or were) some of the associations of scientific workers in Continental countries. Meetings of this class involve little or no expense or trouble to their participants. The use for a week of a "refreshment hall" and public garden is all that is needful for the gatherings of the hundred or two *savants* who alone are eligible as members or anxious to be present. These meetings are often delightful, and lead to informal and productive discussions and personal friendships of permanent value.

I think that our "British Association" is in an unhealthy condition owing to the attempt made by it—not deliberately, but by constitutional looseness of purpose—to combine the features of a friendly picnic and smoking debate with the work of a national conference dealing (under the disadvantage of public ignorance and journalistic inaccuracy) with great questions of national importance. A choice must be made between "picnic" and "conference." I should prefer the picnic.

E. RAY LANKESTER.

September 17.

YOUR criticism of the British Association, that it fails to touch our national life, is most opportune; but whereas you imply merely that it is decadent, to me it seems to be practically defunct. An active worker on its behalf in the past, I have little hope of its resuscitation and doubt if it can ever again fulfil the desires of its early promoters, who undoubtedly held its primary function to be that of advancing public appreciation of scientific discovery. I have always deplored our failure to appeal to the public. Seemingly, the spirit of sacrifice is gone out of science; strange to say, the herd instinct is altogether wanting in our society, so uncontrolled is our individuality. The assumed author of "The Beggar's Opera," after remarking of his characters, "There's not an honourable man among them, nor an honest woman," proceeds to say, "but they are all human." So are the present exploiters of the British Association, though were it not human to be selfish some might even dub them inhuman on account of the narrowness of their outlook and their disregard of public needs.

The neglect of science by the nation has long been the favourite text of the scientific preacher; it occurs to none to consider how complete is the neglect of the nation of which scientific workers have long been consistently guilty. Few seem to realise how great has been our failure of late to make any concerted effort to enlighten the man in the street, how little right we have to despise his ignorance. Scientific jargonese so fills the air that it would be refreshing to go back

to Babylon and the Tower of Babel; scarce a readable book, fit for general consumption, is written on any branch of our scientific work. We ever walk on stilts; little wonder that the public does not reach up to us.

Like every other institution, the Association is a failure for want of leaders; and as discipline is gone out of society and children in these days think themselves superior to their parents—as demonstrated recently in the columns of the *Morning Post*—it is doubtful if, in the future, leaders will be recognised. Men with the Olympic genius of Huxley and with his profound belief in truth are creations of great rarity; even men like Michael Foster, his body-slave, are no longer to be found. Though not gifted with any high degree of imagination, Foster's was a sympathetic nature; he was ever on the look-out for suggestions and ever ready, when a good purpose was mooted, to help in bringing people together to accomplish it. The Royal Society has been a lifeless body since it lost his guiding hand; it has allowed its proper functions to be abrogated in every direction. Nothing, for example, could be more lamentable than its abandonment of the control of scientific research to the bureaucrats.

The British Association no longer has any real influence either on science or on the public. It has ceased to count, more especially since it lost the services of the late Mr. George Griffith, who rendered it such signal service while secretary. Griffith was the ideal official; he had feeling for every subject and his contagious influence in bringing about an understanding between elements often diverse in character was very great. He enticed all its members into active co-operation; his one desire was ever to make the Association of avail.

Of late years the secretariat has been a forbidding rather than an attracting institution; it has not only lacked imagination and "go," it has also had no ideals; and yet it has monopolised control, with the aid of a few elderly amiables who have been persuaded into the belief that they were bosses of the show.

The young man has been too little noticed; being afraid to speak out, feeling that his elders resent any expression of opinion, he has had no reason to take an active interest in the Association. The young man must be more cared for in future.

If the Association be continued, its constitution must be entirely changed. It is, perhaps, significant that at Cardiff the general committee relegated to a committee the appointment of a new treasurer—really a matter to be dealt with by the council. In point of fact, the council exists only in name; control rests with the official ring, who resent every criticism and any intervention with ideas. I would suggest that the two secretaries and the treasurer should each be appointed for three years, not more, so that every subject might be represented in turn; if only one of the three were appointed in any one year, the remaining two would always be men who had some previous experience of office. The council might consist of the officers, together with the president, the president of the previous year, the president-designate and a single delegate from each of the sections, half of these delegates being chosen afresh either each year or every other year. The business of the Association should be entirely carried out at meetings of the council, not settled previously by an official caucus. The delegate from a section should each year present a report to his sectional committee so as to bring the proceedings of the council under discussion.

The functions of the general committee need to be

NO. 2656, VOL. 106]

more clearly defined and perhaps limited; the "freak" has too great a chance at present and as no one knows what topic is to come under consideration, the discussions are rarely representative of the real state of opinion.

Of late the Association has lost what little hold it had on the public generally, owing to the commercialisation of the Press; even the *Times* is now given over to tit-bit-ery and the reports it prints of the Association meetings are worthless for all practical purposes. Some new method of running the scientific publicity campaign must be thought out. It may be worth while for the Association to spend its annual income on advertising in two or three of the chief papers, arranging that between them these report the proceedings in full. Money for research can now be had from other sources and the public has the right to demand that, being taxed for research, its contribution to the Association shall be used largely on its own behalf.

As to the work of the annual meeting, I am entirely with you in thinking that the sections should unite in treating subjects broadly on lines such as the Faraday Society has followed. Instead of a dozen separate sections sitting each year, it would be far better to have at most four.

The discourse delivered by Prof. Eddington may be referred to as an example of the address which appeals to specialists; it is of enthralling interest, yet far too technical; many of the conclusions arrived at need explanation to make them clear to the scientific mind not specially versed in the subject. Such an address, in fact, needs considerable working up to make it of avail even to the instructed reader.

Subjects can always be found on which we need posting up which are of general as well as of special interest; for example, what precisely is the present state of the evidence in favour of evolution? "General" Bramwell Booth scoffs at the conception as "stuff and nonsense." With what case can we confront him and literary quibblers like Mr. G. K. Chesterton? It is long since Huxley discussed the horse in public; in the interval much new evidence has been brought to light which should be presented. The chalk has told an undeniable story, yet how many know it? It is our own fault that the ecclesiastically minded, in their ignorance, speak of us as though we were mere speculators in knowledge, constantly shifting hypotheses without ever arriving at clear conclusions.

To mention other subjects, at the moment the fuel problem is one of the greatest importance; only the food problem is of greater urgency. On matters such as these the public stands much in need of enlightenment. Obviously, each town visited would be interested in having some particular subject special to itself treated exhaustively.

To make the meeting of more than local and passing value, the essays brought forward in the sections for criticism and discussion should be printed in advance and published, with the considered discussions, without any delay. Such a book of authoritative opinion could not but find a ready sale.

If something serious were attempted, something serious would be done. Now everything is attempted, and little, if anything, done. Insisting, as we constantly do, on the value of education, it is imperative that we show ourselves educable and ready to read the signs of the times.

HENRY E. ARMSTRONG.

THE leading article in *NATURE* of September 16 gives articulation to notions which have been very prevalent of late. One does, indeed, occasionally hear the sug-